

## Time to resurrect original birth control document

Robert McClory | Apr. 2, 2012 NCR Today

It's been 46 years since the Pontifical Commission on Birth Control created by Pope John XXIII submitted its findings to John's successor, Pope Paul VI. Unfortunately, that document, *Responsible Parenthood*, the fruit of five years of work, study and prayer that involved 60 experts in theology, science and population trends as well as several married couples, has been long ago buried and is rarely discussed except by old-timers who remember what a stir it created when its contents were published in the pages of *NCR* in 1967, much to the disapproval of the Vatican. There is a kind of calm, common sense running through the whole document that has never gotten the broad attention I believe it deserves. Perhaps it's not too late.

Here in a compact nutshell is what *Responsible Parenthood* said:

The morality of sexual acts between married people ... does not depend on the direct fecundity of each and every particular act. ... For a conscience correctly formed ... is altogether distinguished from a mentality ... which is egotistically and irrationally opposed to fruitfulness ...

The true opposition is not to be sought between some material conformity to the physiological processes of nature and some artificial intervention. For it is natural to man to use his skill in order to put under human control what is given by physical nature. The opposition is really to be sought between one way of acting which is contraceptive and opposed to prudent and generous fruitfulness, and another way which is an ordered relationship to responsible fruitfulness and which has a concern for education and all the essential human and Christian values.

In other words, said the document, artificial contraception is not sinful in itself. Everything depends on the motive of the couple and the method used.

The public is far more familiar with another document, the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, which Paul VI produced in 1968 as a direct refutation of what the commission had recommended. In it, he declared that all forms of artificial contraception are intrinsically evil and absolutely forbidden. The encyclical represented a victory for a tiny coterie of men who subverted the commission's labors by preying on Pope Paul's fears that if he altered traditional moral teaching on sexuality in any way, great scandal would occur and huge numbers of Catholics might leave the church. So in effect, he said, "Thank you, commission members, nothing has changed, the old rules forbidding contraception remain intact."

The world of Catholicism has not been the same since *Humanae Vitae*. Like an earthquake, it struck the church with tremendous force, and its shock waves, continuing for almost five decades now, insistently chop away at the church's credibility. Ironically, Paul's concern about the possible departure of multitudes if he had authorized change has led to departure on a scale he could not have dreamt of -- precisely because he did not authorize change. Almost every study of the church post-1968 identifies *Humanae Vitae* as the great turning point in the fortunes of the Catholicism, with the hemorrhaging of millions from the church and the blatant rejection of Paul's teaching by the overwhelming majority of those who stay.

Every attempt by theologians and some bishops to revisit the doctrine through the years have been instantly struck down by the Holy See. It's as if the law of *Humanae Vitae* is as settled as the Ten Commandments; it admits of no criticism, no alteration and no discussion. Yet contraception keeps coming up as a sticking point, most recently in the controversy between the U.S. bishops and the Obama administration. The bishops insist the argument is only about freedom of religion, but anyone who studies the issue for five minutes realizes that at the heart of the discussion is the freedom of the bishops to express to the world their disapproval of contraception.

*NCR*, in its March 30-April 12 issue, heartily endorsed the call by Australian Bishop Geoffrey Robinson for "a thorough and honest reexamination of the church's teaching on sexuality."

I would suggest that such a re-examination might begin by going back to where the road divided -- to *Responsible Parenthood*, the old Pontifical Commission on Birth Control document that represented the collective wisdom of so many men and women but was never allowed to get off the ground.

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